



Larry Silver and Jeffrey Chipps Smith, eds. *The Essential Dürer*

The Essential Dürer by Larry Silver; Jeffrey Chipps Smith

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Larry Silver and Jeffrey Chipps Smith, eds. *The Essential Dürer*.

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As a presentation of current research *The Essential Dürer* will be of interest to specialists and stimulate scholarly discussion. However, in attempting to characterize what is essential about Dürer this collection of essays falls short.

Dürer's artistic output is vast — some 1,000 drawings, 100 paintings, and 500 engravings and woodcuts have been attributed to him, as well as his extensive diaries and theoretical writings — a rich trove of evidence that makes him arguably the best-documented of Renaissance artists. Around his oeuvre a highly specialized literature, daunting to neophytes, has developed. One indispensable annotated bibliography contains 935 entries — Jane Campbell Hutchison, *Dürer: A Guide to Research* (2007) — and these are only the publications since 1971. It is not unusual for scholars to apologize before adding to the discourse, as Jan Bialostocki did when faced with the “tremendous load of erudition,” stating that it was “with great

reluctance that an author starts to write a new book concerning Dürer" (Jan Bialostocki, *Dürer and His Critics* [1986], 11).

For *The Essential Dürer*, editors Larry Silver and Jeffrey Chipps Smith make no such apologies, and claim that this collection of essays will "provide newcomers to the artist as well as experienced viewers of his work an overview of the most important features of his oeuvre" (xi). As would be expected of an overview, the volume neatly separates according to different media, with essays on Dürer's drawings, prints, paintings, sculpture. This is followed by essays that focus on significant contexts, including Dürer's formative trips to Venice, his journey in the Netherlands as a mature artist, and his involvement with the courts of Frederick the Wise and Emperor Maximilian.

Overall, the contributors show a mastery of the key sources: Anzelewsky, Bartsch, Rupprich, and Winkler references are firmly at hand here. However, the focus of some of the essays is decidedly narrow for a collection that claims to be an "introductory volume" (xii). For example, in the essay "Dürer and Painting," Catherine Crawford Lubet focuses extensively on underdrawings and what they can tell us about Dürer's study of Venetian painting. While this is certainly an intriguing question, the scope of this essay is contrary to what one would expect from an introduction to the artist's work, and the majority of Dürer's fascinating and still underexplored paintings receive little attention here.

The problem is not that there is no original scholarship in *The Essential Dürer* — there is — but rather that the volume purports to be for newcomers. Given this declared aim, several essays are perplexing for their inclusion. Even the title of Pia F. Cuneo's essay "The Artist, His Horse, a Print and Its Audience: Producing and Viewing the Ideal in Dürer's *Knight, Death and the Devil* (1513)" is indicative of a resolute specialization, and ultimately begs the question: can a newcomer appreciate an extended discussion of Dürer's interest in equine proportions? Corine Schleif's discussion of the much-debated relationship between Dürer, his wife Agnes, and his friend Willibald Pirckheimer, is intriguing, albeit speculative, and one wonders whether this essay might be more appropriately published in a specialized literary journal.

While *The Essential Dürer* may not provide the "comprehensive and synthetic view of Albrecht Dürer" (9) that its editors hoped for, it does include some promising lines of research. The most engaging essay in the volume comes from Jeffrey Chipps Smith, whose "Dürer and Sculpture" focuses on Dürer's connections to a medium that he never worked in. While references to sculpture in Dürer's writings are few, his designs for sculptors and goldsmiths, as well as the extensive use of his prints as models, are excellent case studies in Dürer's intensive reception. Smith never wavers in his commitment to difficult historical sources, while at the same time providing a fine and accessible survey that fills a gap in the existing literature.

Statements elsewhere in the volume are sure to cause debate, and not only amongst Dürer scholars. Those who research drawings will be struck by Christiane Andersson and Larry Silver's contentious statement that by the year 1500 in Germany, drawing existed as an "autonomous art form" (15). In the final essay, Keith Moxey compares the twentieth-century appropriation of Dürer (and his

contemporary Matthias Grünewald) by National Socialists, a topic all too often avoided, and concludes with an extended reflection on the methodologies of art historians. Moxey's essay does point to one of the most fruitful lines of enquiry to have emerged in recent art-historical discourse — reception — but once again one is struck by the specialist tone of this essay.

The Dürer who emerges from *The Essential Dürer* embodies a range of characteristics: ceaseless curiosity, entrepreneurial determination, and an astonishing ability to excel in the widest range of activities imaginable. Perhaps it is impossible to expect a “comprehensive and synthetic view” of such a figure, especially now that art history as a field of inquiry has come to embody such diverse interests in and of itself.

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